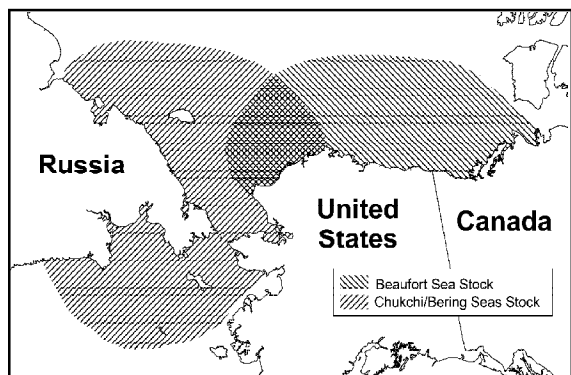




U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Wildlife Biologue

## *Polar Bear* (*Ursus maritimus*)

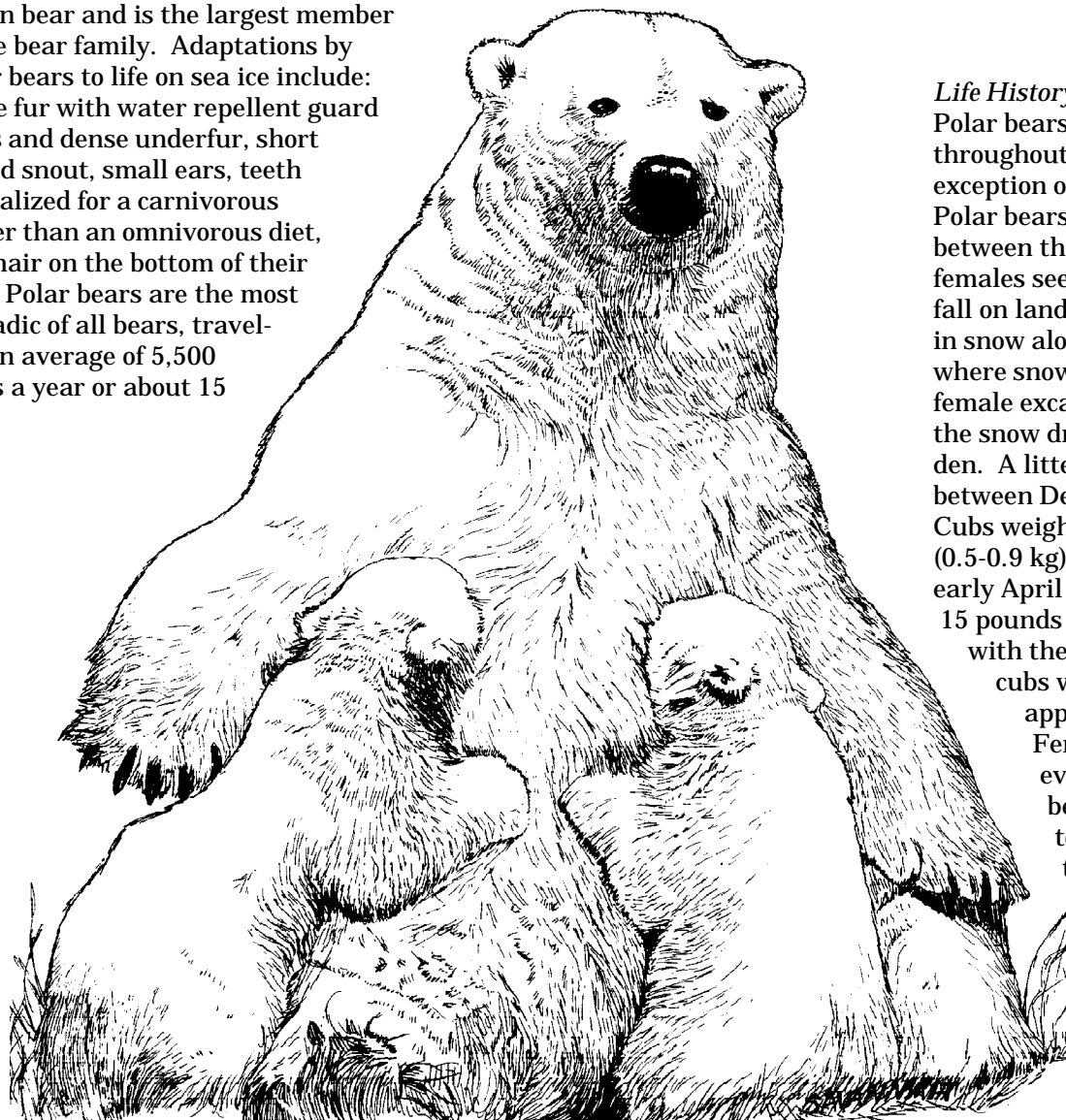


miles a day. Males measure from 8 to 11 feet (2.4-3.4 m) and generally weigh from 600 to 1,200 pounds (272-543 kg) but may weigh up to 1,500 pounds (679 kg). Females measure from 6 to 8 feet (1.8-2.4 m) and weigh from 400 to 700 pounds (181-317 kg).



### *Description*

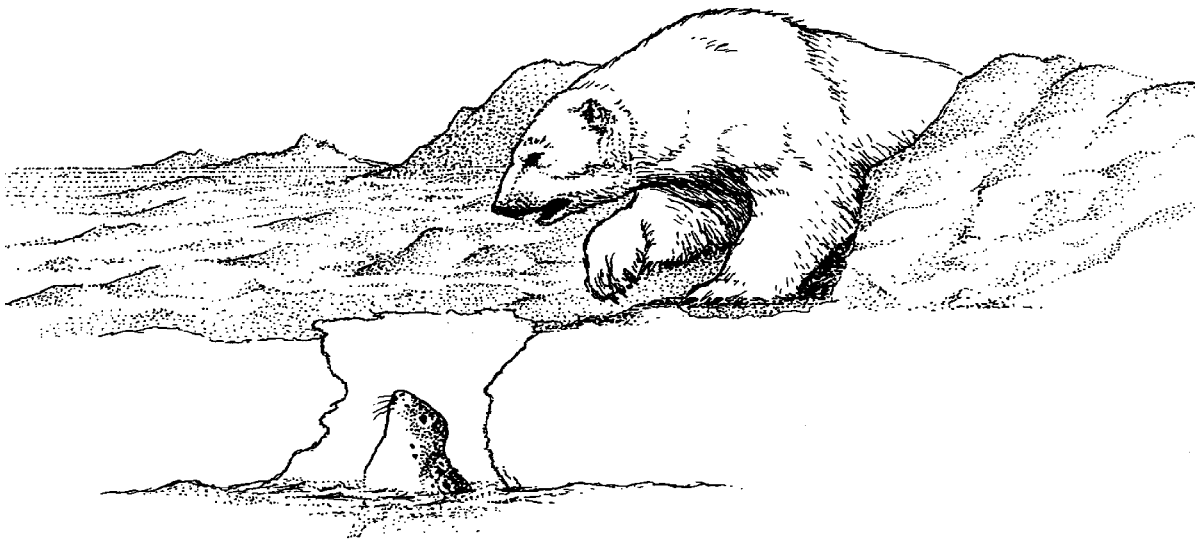
The polar bear has evolved from the brown bear and is the largest member of the bear family. Adaptations by polar bears to life on sea ice include: white fur with water repellent guard hairs and dense underfur, short furred snout, small ears, teeth specialized for a carnivorous rather than an omnivorous diet, and hair on the bottom of their feet. Polar bears are the most nomadic of all bears, traveling an average of 5,500 miles a year or about 15



### *Life History*

Polar bears are solitary animals throughout most of their life, with the exception of mating and cub rearing. Polar bears reach breeding maturity between the ages of 3 and 6. Pregnant females seek out denning areas in late fall on land or sea ice. Dens are made in snow along bluffs and rough ice where snow drifts accumulate. The female excavates a small chamber in the snow drift to serve as a maternity den. A litter of 1 to 3 cubs are born between December and early January. Cubs weigh between 1 and 2 pounds (0.5-0.9 kg) at birth. In late March or early April when the cubs weigh about 15 pounds (6.8 kg), they leave the den with their mother. The mother and cubs will stay together for approximately 2 ½ years.

Female polar bears will breed every 3 or 4 years. Polar bears in the wild can live up to 32 years but it is believed that most do not live beyond 25 years.



### *Range and Population Levels*

Polar bears live in the Northern hemisphere in the zone of active ice which extends in a circle around the more stable core of the arctic ice cap. Polar bears inhabit Greenland, coastal Norway, northern Russia, the northern arctic islands and Hudson Bay in Canada, and the northern and north-western coasts of the United States. In Alaska, there are two breeding populations, or "stocks." The Beaufort Sea stock is shared between Canada and the United States; the Chukchi and Bering seas stock is shared between Russia and the United States.

Polar bears travel extensively in relation to the position of the sea ice edge. In winter, bears off the coast of Alaska commonly occur as far south as St. Lawrence Island and may even reach St. Matthew Island and the Kuskokwim Delta. During the summer, bears occur near the edge of the pack ice in the Beaufort Sea and the Chukchi and Bering seas. In Alaska, most polar bear denning occurs along the north coast of Alaska within the

Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the adjacent sea ice. It is estimated that there are about 22,000 - 28,000 polar bears worldwide and approximately 3,000 - 5,000 in Alaska.

### *Food Habits*

Ringed seals inhabit the southern edge of the ice pack and are a primary food for polar bears. Polar bears capture seals by waiting by breathing holes and at the edge of the leads and cracks in the ice. Bears also stalk seals resting on top of the ice and catch young seals by breaking into pupping chambers in snow on top of the ice in the spring. Polar bears also hunt bearded seals, walrus, and beluga whales. Bear will feed on carrion such as whale, walrus, and seal carcasses that they find along the coast.

### *Management and Protection*

In the United States, polar bears are protected from hunting and harassment by the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 (Act). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the federal agency responsible for managing polar bears. In Alaska, biologists from the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Alaska Science Center, U.S. Geological Survey, monitor the populations health and status. Threats to the polar bear populations are generally human related such as over harvest, industrial activities (shipping, seismic exploration, oil drilling and transport), and habitat degradation (toxic chemicals, radiation, and oil spills). Eski-

mos and other coastal Alaska Natives are allowed to harvest polar bears for subsistence and handicraft purposes under the Act. Polar bears have traditionally played an important role in the culture and livelihood of Alaska Natives. The Fish and Wildlife Service and the Alaska Nanuuq Commission work in cooperation to co-manage the subsistence harvest of polar bears. An international conservation agreement for polar bears was signed in 1973 by the United States, Russia, Norway, Canada, and Denmark (Greenland) to provide for the conservation of polar bears world-wide. A bilateral conservation agreement between the United States and Russia, in development, would provide for cooperative management of the Chukchi and Bering seas polar bear population.

U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
Marine Mammals Management  
1011 East Tudor Road  
Anchorage, AK 99503  
(907) 786-3800  
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